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ABSTRACT

To help secondary school principals make meetings more effective and personally satisfying, this pocket-size pamphlet contains guidelines in the form of 40 rules. Each page contains a rule, a paragraph elaborating on the rule, and a key self-evaluation question. For example, "Better Meeting Rule No. 12 'Stay on Task'" concludes with the question "Do I check periodically during a meeting to be certain that the group is 'on task'?" Among the topics covered in the rules are scheduling, procedures, physical environment, and interpersonal relations. (MLF)

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Meetings!

**ACCOMPLISHING MORE
WITH BETTER & FEWER**

Robert Maidment
William Bullock, Jr.

National Association of Secondary School Principals

Dedication

Dedicated to those secondary school administrators who conduct good meetings and who keep working to make them even better.

Acknowledgment

Suggestions for this booklet resulted from a brainstorming session with advanced graduate students in education at the College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, Va. We gratefully acknowledge the contributions made by these "professional meeting attenders": Robert Abdo, Marsha Krotseng, Kelli Mansel, and Robert Richardson.

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Preface

Secondary school principals, according to most time-on-task surveys, invest an inordinate amount of their time in meetings — team, faculty, staff, student, parent, social, civic, central office, and professional.

While some meetings are avoidable, most are not. Some meetings, such as the induction ceremony for an honor society, are pleasant. Others, such as appearing in court, are not.

Meetings come in various forms, sizes, and places. They're formal and informal. They're scheduled and impromptu. Meetings are held inside schools and out, on school board time and off. Meetings are short and long.

An important question for all principals to ask themselves is, "How can we make our meetings more effective and derive more satisfaction from our involvement in them?"

The classic distinction between "efficiency" and "effectiveness" suggests that the former is "doing the job right" while the latter is "doing the right job." We've all conducted efficient meetings that yielded totally ineffective outcomes. We want to be certain that where we're going is where we're intending to go. Following these guidelines is no guarantee that we're "doing the right job," but it provides a safeguard against doing the *wrong* one.

Since a principal's presence in all meetings represents a personal investment of time, effort, and talent, it simply makes good sense to extract as much worth from every opportunity to inform, to influence, to

interpret, or to inspire the various publics served. The title of this small book reflects the omnipresence and the pervasiveness of meetings. The subtitle — "Accomplishing More with Better and Fewer" is our intent. We invite you to join us in sharpening our meeting skills and to enjoy the process!

Better Meeting Rule No. 1

Meet Only When You Must

If there were an irrevocable golden rule for meetings, it would be: *Meet only when it's absolutely necessary!* Whenever we can avoid the "we're-here-again-it-must-be-Tuesday" syndrome, we ease time restraints for all professionals in school settings. Convening any group solely because a schedule or a tradition dictates is both counterproductive and insensitive.

Key Question

☐

Is there a legitimate and defensible reason for this particular meeting?

Better Meeting Rule No. 2

Cultivate Informal Contacts

The principal who is highly visible within a school follows the Managing by Wandering Around (MBWA) concept. Frequent contacts with staff members in a hallway, in a classroom between bells, over coffee in the cafeteria, or on the practice field actually *prevent* longer contacts later. The MBWA principal increases informal visibility now and avoids formal "visitability" later.

Key Question

☐

Can I increase my informal contacts with staff members, thereby reducing the frequency of formal meetings?

Better Meeting Rule No. 3

Acknowledge the Schedules Of Others

The secondary school is a complex organization with a dozen or more specialized units each having different program needs. Although meetings are essential to internal communication, some are more essential than others. Certain gatherings should not be preempted. A sudden impulse to convene department heads to review exam schedules, for example, could deprive a science curriculum revision group of its leader.

First, we must know when and why staff members are convening. Next, we must decide whether or not our meeting needs take precedence.

Key Question

☐

Have I made certain that it is convenient for others to attend my meeting?

Better Meeting Rule No. 4

Plan Meetings Cooperatively

Meetings planned only by the principal are perceived by faculty members as the principal's meetings. Even when such gatherings are judged effective, this judgment is often that of the principal and not that of the faculty. Here, responsibility for success is assumed only by the planner.

In contrast, cooperatively planned meetings spread responsibility, will more likely include agenda items of general interest, and create a collective stake in achieving the desired results. No one wants to be embarrassed by a lousy meeting he or she helped to plan.

Key Question

☐

Have I selectively involved staff members in planning some meetings?

Better Meeting Rule No. 5

Provide Ample Lead Time

Some rare situations demand an immediate summoning of staff members. Although few criticize a legitimate crisis, most of us disdain the false alarms. The 2:30 p.m. summons to a same-day 3:30 p.m. meeting in the library to be reminded that grade sheets must be completed on time because computer schedules so dictate will breed discontent. One curious dissident might even purposefully withhold the data just to see if the predicted dire consequences actually occur.

Similarly, provide ample lead time, whenever possible, in canceling meetings that had been appropriately scheduled in advance.

Key Question

☐

Have I provided sufficient time for participants to re-adjust their schedules?

Better Meeting Rule No. 6

Help Participants Prepare

One way to encourage "running starts" and discourage "halting stalls" in meetings is to be certain that whatever information a participant needs to know *is* known as well in advance as is practical.

Agendas, previous meeting summaries, materials to be discussed, background information, and data analyses all comprise the "get smart" stage for anyone about to attend a meeting. Although few really study the material prior to a meeting, those who do usually enhance the decision-making process.

Key Question

☐

Have I distributed appropriate background data for all participants prior to the meeting?

Better Meeting Rule No. 7

Start on Time

We've watched group leaders await latecomers and have privately recalled our first psychology professor who suggested that such behavior punishes the punctual and rewards the remiss.

A failure of leaders to set personal examples by adhering to scheduled times is an affront to group participants. Quite likely the message many teachers receive is, "This meeting isn't very important and, apparently, neither are we!"

Key Question

☐

Do I consistently start meetings on time and follow a predetermined schedule?

Better Meeting Rule No. 8

Agree to Procedures In Advance

Have you ever known a baseball game to start without the homeplate "ritual" between the umpire crew and managers? One doesn't play without groundrules. Our various groups need to agree on working norms, processes, and procedures *prior* to every meeting or series of related meetings. While these procedures or groundrules don't protect us against conflict, they often prevent discussions from becoming arguments.

Key Question

☐

Before a meeting starts do I make certain that the group has agreed about appropriate working procedures?

Better Meeting Rule No. 9

Develop an Agenda

Conducting a faculty meeting without an agenda is about as plausible as achieving consensus without agreement. Without an agenda, a faculty meeting can go anywhere and usually does. If you don't know where the meeting is going, how do you know you want to go there?

A carefully planned agenda forces the principal to examine all aspects of a meeting and to build it into some logical structure. Everyone knows now what the beginning, the middle, and the end are likely to be.

Key Question

☐

Does the agenda reflect the meeting direction, set of tasks, and relative time constraints?

Better Meeting Rule No. 10

Keep Part of the Agenda Open

A planned agenda is an essential part of a smoothly conducted meeting. Often, however, the activities and time are excessively structured allowing no opportunity for addressing emerging interests and individual concerns. Eventually, this control everything approach causes people to accumulate hidden agenda items that are more important to them than are the planned items. Anticipate such developments by keeping part of the agenda "open." Place the open time near the end of the planned agenda, but not so late that discussion is crammed into the time available.

Key Question

☐

Have I provided time for open items on the agenda?

Better Meeting Rule No. 11

Understand the Task

While attending to interaction affects, interpersonal needs, flow of communication, and the personal comfort of meeting participants engenders positive feelings, this only sets the stage for task accomplishment. Intrinsic to the process is an identified, well-defined task requiring collective action.

After all members understand the task, lead them step-by-step toward closure by capitalizing on all the available resources. Monitor both the quantity and the quality of input. Group satisfaction flows naturally from task accomplishment. Discussions with no end in view are nothing more than words floating in a circle.

Key Question

☐

During meetings do I make certain that all participants fully understand each task or issue being addressed?

Better Meeting Rule No. 12

Stay on Task

A venerable saw reminds us that although meetings consume hours, they are recorded in minutes. Although we readily acknowledge the importance of time-on-task for students, we often ignore our own advice in meetings as we flaunt the obscure and vaunt the obvious. We need to *invest*, not spend — and certainly not waste — precious meeting time. Reinventing wheels or spinning them are time-consuming and unproductive tasks. Once staff members understand their task, the principal has the responsibility for keeping everyone on track.

Key Question

☐

Do I check periodically during a meeting to be certain that the group is "on track"?

Better Meeting Rule No. 13

Keep Presentations Short

One of faculty members' legitimate fears is being forced to endure lengthy, rambling reports. We've learned any number of ways to diminish this discomfort — knitting, grading papers, holding private conversations, daydreaming — but nothing seems really to help as much as a short, crisp, to-the-point, action-oriented presentation. Advise presenters to explain the issue, note any need for action, answer questions, and sit down — soon.

Key Question

☐

If an oral report is necessary, is it well-conceived, on-target — and short?

Better Meeting Rule No. 14

Case the Space

Have you ever rattled around in an auditorium disconnected from both colleagues and presenter? Or, have you ever been "skrunched" into tight quarters and wondered whose deodorant wasn't working?

Extremes in either isolation or intimacy predictably cause discomfort. And the irritability thus generated leads to inattention. Therefore, if the space allocated a specific meeting task is inappropriate, we might as well abort the proceedings.

Key Question

☐

Have I made certain that the task appropriately fits the available space?

Better Meeting Rule No. 15

Allow Ample Time To Set Up a Meeting

The setting of a meeting is as significant to success as the content. When staging a meeting, conceptualize the total environment that will extract the most from participants, then test your ideas with other staff members. Skimping on time to set the appropriate stage for a meeting often costs downtime later. Such an oversight will likely result in something significant being overlooked.

Key Question

☐

Does my checklist cover everything essential to setting this meeting?

Better Meeting Rule No. 16

Make the Meeting Room Ready for the Meeting

When asked why he scheduled an all-school assembly for the first hour on the opening day of school, a midwestern principal noted it was the easiest, quickest way to dust off the auditorium seats following the summer break. Although we'd like to believe he had other reasons, at least he was concerned about the *next* group to use the facility.

Prior to any meeting the residue of the previous users should be removed, including ashtrays, black-board notations, or other possibly distracting remnants. The meeting room should always look as if it were ready for use *before* it is used.

Key Question

☐

Have I attended to all the necessary custodial functions before the group arrives?

Better Meeting Rule No. 17

Attend to All Creature Comforts

Sometimes, we become so task-oriented that we overlook our own "creature comforts." Is the meeting room well-ventilated? Is the temperature appropriate? Can group members hear everything? Is there sufficient glareless light? Have the groundrules regarding smoking been accepted? Those who are seldom annoyed by these environmental facts have difficulty understanding how devastating they can be for the rest of us.

Key Question

☐

Have I carefully attended to all of the comfort factors?

Better Meeting Rule No. 18

Select Appropriate Furniture

Winston Churchill is credited with observing that we shape our buildings and thereafter they shape us. We can say the same thing about furniture. There seems to be a positive correlation between the comfort level of a chair and the comfort level of a meeting. Don't force faculty members to sit on chairs too small or at tables too low. Select furniture that will provide the degree of comfort necessary for achieving meeting goals.

Key Question

☐

Have I selected the most appropriate furniture for this meeting?

Better Meeting Rule No. 19

Keep Seating Flexible

No single seating arrangement is best for all meetings. Certain tasks and objectives require specific arrangements since furniture is an integrated part of a meeting.

The structure of the meeting itself influences the way information is transmitted. If the intent, for example, is power over the group, seat people in rows facing the principal. If the intent is shared power, seat them in circles with the principal as a part of that gathering. While the former arrangement usually dampens discussion, the latter arrangement encourages it.

Key Question

☐

Have I provided the most appropriate seating arrangement for this meeting?

Better Meeting Rule No. 20

Check Both the Equipment And the User

Perhaps nothing is more disconcerting to a group or more disappointing to a group leader than failure of audiovisual equipment. We must make certain that slides are in order and right-side-up, films are undamaged, projectors run, and outlets provide current. If one doesn't both prepare and test, then all AV support should be resisted. And, incidentally, when you use an overhead, remember the "rule of seven" — *never* more than seven lines or seven words per line. Equipment must run right *and* be rightly run. A principal's credibility can be diminished by a blown excitor bulb when no replacement is within reach.

Key Question

☐

Have I both previewed the materials and pretested the equipment?

Better Meeting Rule No. 21

Eliminate Distractions

Distractions may be useful if one is having root canal work or robbing a bank because attention is diverted from the business at hand. In meetings, however, distractions serve no useful purpose. When faculty members are distracted by extraneous incidents, they become uncomfortable, lose their train of thought, reduce their interest, and often become only tentative participants.

This "dripping water effect" can be minimized by, among other things, decreasing the use of inappropriate words and phrases, posting "meeting in progress" signs, controlling side conversations, and refusing telephone calls. Don't permit distractions to subvert the desire to be present.

Key Question

☐

Am I aware of possible distractions and have I taken steps to eliminate them?

Better Meeting Rule No. 22

Schedule Time To Socialize

Group effectiveness is measured, to no small degree, by the social distance between faculty members and between the principal and the faculty. To shorten this distance, encourage informal interactions by creating an opportunity for everyone to socialize.

Now, the comfort level is enhanced, personal relationships are established, and positions are shared. Readiness for faculty meetings begins to take shape at the point of contact over a cup of coffee.

Key Question

☐

Have I provided an opportunity for everyone to become better acquainted?

Better Meeting Rule No. 23

Feed the Troops

Most teachers dislike meetings. Perhaps we've unintentionally encouraged them to particularly abhor those meetings that principals routinely call to discuss "administrivia" during after-school hours when everyone is tired, thirsty, and/or hungry. While such meetings are too late for lunch and too early for supper, we elevate dispositions by providing appropriate refreshments. Carrot sticks *can* motivate.

Key Question

☐

Can I appropriately "adjust attitudes" by providing refreshments?

Better Meeting Rule No. 24

Examine Group Norms

Eventually, all groups develop a set of norms for dealing with the behavior of group members and for carrying out their business. Norms are rules or standards of behavior "controlling" everyone within a group.

For example, low-producing groups' production norms establish low-level productivity as do high-producing groups that have high-producing norms. Individuals joining the groups are usually pressured by other members to conform to the existing rules of behavior to the degree those members deem satisfactory.

Principals, too, are required to recognize existing norms and generally don't violate them without ample justification. Norms stabilize groups and provide both focus and security. Collective effort is enhanced through recognized and accepted parameters of behavior.

Key Question

☐

Have I identified those norms in this faculty group that yield the best results?

Better Meeting Rule No. 25

Get Active Participation

One sign of participants' interest in the business of a faculty meeting is discussion that includes almost all faculty members. Members talk not only to one another, but also to the group as a whole. Everyone is encouraged to share information, opinions, and suggestions.

The principal encourages participation by studying patterns of communication and sharing these findings with group members to help them overcome individual apathy, to avoid the suppression of ideas, to control meandering conversations, and to eliminate domination of discussion by a few. When a group member expresses a point and gets no response at all, it is called a "plop." And plops cause flops.

Key Question

☐

Am I aware of who talks to whom in faculty meetings?

Better Meeting Rule No. 26

Control Meetings

Only the naive or foolish person will try to conduct a faculty meeting without selected mechanisms to ensure control. A perceptive principal works with faculty members to design procedures and rules that everyone agrees should be enforced. These mechanisms are then used to keep the group on track, to facilitate discussions, and to encourage decision making.

Never back away from asserting control when it is needed, but don't impose so much control that divergent views are stifled. One maintains control of a meeting by never losing it.

Key Question

☐

What control procedures will best facilitate the work of the group?

Better Meeting Rule No. 27

Appreciate Humor

Humor is usually fun, and it is a game played by everyone. Rarely will a principal conduct a faculty meeting in which nothing humorous occurs unless too much attention is given to ceremony, things are too serious, or no one has a sense of the comic.

By capitalizing on the humorous aspects of meetings, the principal can help reduce tension, control antagonisms, encourage wit, and keep people involved. Humor is a rejuvenating change of pace and an energizing force.

Key Question

☐

Do I appreciate and acknowledge the humorous side of events?

Better Meeting Rule No. 28

Avoid Ambiguities

Often, meeting participants expend considerable effort to arrive at inconclusive, indeterminate decisions. Nothing is resolved, and if the product is an ambiguous rule or regulation, it sets the stage for self-serving interpretation and implementation.

People have a penchant for clarifying garbled messages by supplying idiosyncratic information and drawing faulty inferences. Avoid such traps by frequently restating an issue being discussed, seeking and furnishing interpretations and clarifications of all positions, and asking for feedback on *what* is understood.

Key Question

☐

Do I check to determine that everyone received the intended message?

Better Meeting Rule No. 29

Learn To Read Silence

Silence in meetings is as much a part of communication as talking. A message is being communicated to the principal that may be negative or positive. The participants could be bored, indifferent, timid, or suffering from some perceived ridicule. Silence may also signal active listening, consensus, accommodation, or even quick reflection. The principal must uncover the underlying reasons for silence before taking any measures to deal with it. The social distance between a principal and the faculty is often measured by the silent signals of the faculty group.

Key Question

☐

Do I place the silent agenda on the open agenda?

Better Meeting Rule No. 30

Manage Hostility

Hostility comes easily to most of us. Often a quick fix for what is wrong, it requires little thought. When people resort to hostility, however, the recipient is generally neither persuaded nor assuaged. Hostility breeds even more hostility and lengthens the social distance among faculty members and between the principal and faculty members.

This polarizing effect can be managed by neither using nor condoning hostility. Another strategy is to ignore hostility when one is the target, or to work through it for a cathartic effect. Note the rule on humor.

Key Question

☐

Do I have an effective plan for dealing with hostility?

Better Meeting Rule No. 31

Vary the Approach

We once used 20 separate instructional approaches with a group of prospective school administrators to determine what practices they preferred. Apparently, everyone liked something. But that "something" varied proportionately to the number of students involved. A few liked question/answer formats, some opted for lectures, while others enjoyed visual presentations. We were most distressed to find that some students preferred outside speakers!

Perhaps the predictable sameness of our meetings contributes to their somnolent quality. While a bit of variety probably won't unsettle your meeting, the diversity might even cause some staff members to become more involved. It's worth a try.

Key Question

☐

Do I vary some of the approaches I use in my meetings?

Better Meeting Rule No. 32

Talk Straight

The words of a secondary principal or a leader in any organization can be misinterpreted. The awesome flexibility of our language is at once a blessing and a hindrance. Even simple words convey multiple meanings. Talking "straight" — avoiding sarcasm, innuendo, jargon, barbs, inappropriate language, spurious illustrations, sexist comments, negative ethnic references, convoluted logic, esoteric material, irrelevant satire — not only assists our listeners to understand our messages but also reduces the need for clarification, revision, or repetition. Words can be used to express or to impress. The choice is ours.

Key Question

☐

Am I willing to ask my assistant or a staff member to help me monitor what I say in meetings?

Better Meeting Rule No. 33

Respect Differences

Since we're in the people business, whatever can go wrong in our meetings eventually does. Some staff members find security in procedures, some are uncompromisingly results-oriented, others wouldn't join in any action if it meant that even one individual would be slighted, and still others want change for its own sake. Expand this conflict-prone quartet with the normally hostile, comic, passive, evasive, and apathetic types, and we can be forgiven if we occasionally marvel when groups succeed.

When we yield on our own notions of "good" or "bad," and "right" and "wrong," and deal only with managing expected differences, our insolvable problems become brilliant opportunities.

Key Question

☐

Do I regard interpersonal conflict as a normal, needed, and challenging ingredient in all group endeavors?

Better Meeting Rule No. 34

Protect Confidentiality

Teachers, counselors, and administrators are involved daily with highly sensitive information — especially certain pupil data and various personnel issues. In all of our meetings, informal and formal, we must always weigh the “need” versus the “right” to know factor, and always respect established procedures for protecting pupils and staff. Any leakage, even unintentional, carries the potential for embarrassment, erosion of trust, and in extreme cases, lingering scars and lawsuits.

While a few public officials can legitimately speak from an “off-the-record” platform, the rest of us must exercise extreme care in protecting sources, keeping confidences, and safeguarding sensitive data.

Key Question

☐

Do I periodically review all in-school procedures for the handling of confidential data?

Better Meeting Rule No. 35

Continuously Refine Communication Skills

Surveys consistently yield data indicating that roughly 75 percent of a manager's day is consumed by speaking and listening activity, while the remaining 25 percent is devoted to reading and writing activity. These four skills — speaking, listening, reading, and writing to no small degree determine a principal's effectiveness.

Of the four skills, listening, the most often used, is the least developed. While most of us hear, few of us really listen. We can't even practice this skill if in our meetings we're doing all of the talking! Learning to communicate effectively is a lifetime pursuit — there are no instant miracles.

Key Question

☐

Do I design and pursue self-help activities to assure that my communication skills continue to improve?

Better Meeting Rule No. 36

Stretch for Closure

This is a luxury item. We could easily build a case for the most important meeting word, "closure" — that often exhilarating moment when a decision is mutually reached and accepted. A "We've run out of time — let's take this issue up again next month" announcement can cast a spell of doubt and dismay within the group. Provide for some "stretch time" when important issues need to be discussed and when participant schedules and room availability permit.

Key Question

☐

If necessary, can our meeting time be extended easily?

Better Meeting Rule No. 37

Record Actions Taken

Because the average person forgets half of what was heard in a meeting almost immediately after hearing it, and over time forgets even more, it's necessary to keep a written record of important events. A useful record includes details about what actions were taken, by whom, when, and the relevant circumstances. It is not useful to include informal comments, personal positions, or general debating points. Written records are far more believable than are personal recollections.

Key Question

☐

Are records of all meetings both current and accurate?

Better Meeting Rule No. 38

Schedule Post-Meeting Conferences

Everyone isn't adept at expressing worthy ideas within large groups, but they may be quite effective in one-on-one conferences. Establish a method for having post-meeting conferences that serve to collect information on the adequacy of a meeting, its weaknesses, and its strengths. Actions already taken are clarified and agenda items are obtained for subsequent meetings. Meeting continuity is achieved via this bridging effort.

Key Question

☐

Do I set time aside for staff members to meet in post-meeting sessions?

Better Meeting Rule No. 39

Invite Participant Feedback

Many psychologists claim that people don't grow without constructive feedback. How do I know how well things are going unless I'm open to the thoughts and feelings of others and, more important, willing to modify my behavior accordingly?

At the very least, feedback provides data for making choices. In groups we can encourage questions, be alert to body language signaling a desire to participate, lessen or remove personal and physical barriers that can block group interaction, and ask key people for their assessment of our meetings.

Practice *doesn't* make perfect if we're practicing ineffective group skills. And, only our staff can tell us if we are.

Key Question

☐

Am I sensitive to the need for group members to become meaningfully involved and am I willing to actively seek their feedback?

Better Meeting Rule No. 40

Retire Useless Practices

Policies, procedures, and practices must be periodically revoked, refined, or reconfirmed. We observe the "sunset phenomenon" whenever certain procedures or practices have outlived their usefulness and we systematically retire them. Most organizations, including schools, have a backlog of "sunssets."

Perhaps we've respected custom by adhering to strict parliamentary procedures in our meetings when decision-by-consensus seems to work better. Or, have we preserved meeting "rituals" such as reading minutes? Or, do we continue asking for obscure reports? Look around. Assuredly, there are a few practices awaiting an overdue sunset.

Key Question

☐

Do I periodically review all meeting practices and procedures and eliminate those that serve no meaningful function?

About the Authors

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